

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

May 18, 2005

North Slope Sonoma Mountain Trail Planning

File No. 05-028

Project Manager: Abe Doherty

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$110,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District for trail planning for approximately five miles of the Bay Area Ridge Trail on the North Slope of Sonoma Mountain

LOCATION: Sonoma Mountain Road in unincorporated Sonoma County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Photographs

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred and ten thousand dollars (\$110,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“District”) for preparation of final trail plans and environmental documentation for development of new trails located on the north slope of Sonoma Mountain. This authorization is subject to the condition that, prior to the disbursement of any funds, the District shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

1. A work program, budget, and schedule;
2. The names and qualifications of any contractors or subcontractors that the District intends to employ to implement the project;
3. Evidence that all necessary permits and approvals for the project have been obtained;
and

4. Evidence that all funds necessary to complete this phase of the project have been secured.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the authority of the Conservancy under Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164 regarding projects of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program; and
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize a grant up to \$110,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“District”) for preparation of a trail plan and environmental documentation for approximately five miles of Bay Area Ridge Trail (“Ridge Trail”) on the north slope of Sonoma Mountain in Sonoma County.

This planning project will include the following activities for the Ridge Trail segment from Jack London State Historic Park to Jacobs Ranch: consideration of alternatives for alignment of trails; evaluation and documentation of environmental and archeological resources in the vicinity of the preferred trail alignment; and flagging and surveying the preferred trail alignment. The trail will be designed to avoid impacts to sensitive environmental and archeological resources. Additionally, the project will include the preparation of a plan for extending the Ridge Trail to the north from Jacobs Ranch or Coopers Grove to Annadel State Park.

This project is a priority since it will complete the planning work that is necessary prior to construction of approximately five miles of new Ridge Trail, advancing towards the goal of completing the approximately 500 mile Ridge Trail that connects all Bay Area counties. With the majority of Sonoma County residents living within 15 miles of Sonoma Mountain, there is high demand for recreational opportunities on Sonoma Mountain. Currently, there is only limited trail access on the North Slope of Sonoma Mountain. This new Ridge Trail segment will provide public access and recreation on four newly-acquired properties, totaling approximately 452 acres, which were strategically acquired by the District to provide a continuous trail corridor to the west of Jack London State Historic Park (Exhibit 1). The North Slope Sonoma Mountain Trail will traverse the western boundary of Jack London State Historic Park and extend westward across four District owned properties - Skiles, Wilroth, Coopers Grove and Jacobs Ranch - and one property owned by the Sonoma County Regional Parks Department, the Sonoma Mountain Woodlands.

Since 1990, when Sonoma County voters approved the creation of the District and a sales tax funding source for acquisition, the District has preserved over 65,000 acres of land and was ranked by the Farmland Preservation Report as one of the top five farmland and open space preservation programs in the Nation. This Conservancy grant will support the District in

continuing its collaborative effort to plan and construct a trail through this area, working closely with several non-profit and agency partners, including State Parks and the Sonoma County Regional Parks Department.

Site Description:

Sonoma Mountain is a defining geographic feature of Sonoma County, and serves as a backdrop for Bennett Valley and Sonoma Valley on the north and east side and the Highway 101 scenic corridor and Petaluma Valley on the south and west. The project area is located approximately five miles to the southeast of the city limits of Santa Rosa. The trail alignment will follow the ridgeline on the north slope of Sonoma Mountain before dropping down into Bennett Valley. This will offer views of the Santa Rosa plain, the Coast Ranges, Mt. St. Helena, Bennett Peak, Taylor Mountain and into Napa County.

Along the ridgeline within the project area are large swaths of open grasslands and savannah, offering sweeping views of the surrounding area. At lower elevations are areas more densely forested with tree species such as coast live oak, valley oak, black oak, California buckeye and California bay. In the moist areas on the north facing slopes, Douglas fir, madrone, flowering currant and twinberry are present. The project area also contains some of the few remaining redwood groves on Sonoma Mountain. The headwaters and the south fork of Matanzas Creek are also located within the project area. Wildlife species known to be present on these properties include mountain lions, bobcats, golden eagles, quail, turkeys and deer.

Project History:

In an effort to provide trail connectivity between existing protected lands on and in the vicinity of Sonoma Mountain, the District has recently been acquiring properties northwest of Jack London State Historic Park. The District's efforts to protect the Ridge Trail corridor and develop initial planning for the trail in this area has been supported by planning work by the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, funded by the Conservancy.

In 2003, the District purchased the 168-acre Jacobs Ranch, which will serve as the western extent of the detailed portion of the trail planning project. The District is currently working on improvements to an access road leading from Sonoma Mountain Road to the Jacobs Ranch, which will be used as one of the primary access points to the trail. The District intends to develop a portion of the Jacobs Ranch to serve as a staging and trailhead area. The District is currently working with other non-profit partners, including the Sonoma Mountain Preservation Group, Sonoma County Backcountry Horsemen and Bay Area Barns and Trails Trust to evaluate appropriate interim recreational uses of the property, including equestrian and docent-led activities. The property is currently open for escorted tours, through LandPaths, a qualified non-profit that coordinates public access on District-protected lands.

In early 2004, in collaboration with the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, the District acquired in fee title a 47-acre parcel of the Skiles Ranch, using grant funds from the Conservancy for the purposes of protecting the Ridge Trail corridor. The parcel, which lacks access to a public road, is located adjacent to Jack London State Historic Park and will provide a trail connection between the state park and the Wilroth property to the west.

In the fall of 2004, the District purchased a conservation easement over the 240-acre Wilroth property on the northwestern facing slopes of Sonoma Mountain, which is immediately adjacent to, and managed as part of, the Fairfield-Osborn Preserve. The District also accepted an 11-acre donation from the landowners that provides a key link in the trail corridor between the District-owned portion of the Skiles property and the Sonoma Mountain Woodlands held by Sonoma County Regional Parks.

Finally, in January 2005, the District acquired the 226-acre Cooper's Grove property, which bridges the gap between Jacobs Ranch and the Sonoma Mountain Woodlands. The northern boundary of this property extends to Sonoma Mountain Road, providing opportunities for access from the road onto the North Slope Sonoma Mountain Ridge Trail.

The development of a Ridge Trail segment through the project area will extend the existing Ridge Trail segment that is located in Jack London State Historic Park and on three other properties that the District holds easements on. The construction of this existing 4.5 mile Ridge Trail segment was partially funded by a grant from the Conservancy in 2000.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$110,000
Sonoma Co. Ag. Pres. Op. Sp. District	<u>100,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$210,000

The Conservancy's contribution to the proposed project is expected to come from Proposition 40, the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of 2002. The Proposition 40 legislation (PRC Section 5096.650(b)(8)) allocated funds to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program for the acquisition and development of land, air, and water resources, in accordance with the particular provisions of the statute creating the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy. This project is consistent with the Proposition 40 legislation since it helps implement one of the goals stated in the statute creating the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program (PRC 31162), which is to improve public access to and around ridgetops, through completion of ridge trail systems.

The District's matching funds will be used for coordinating multi-agency collaboration and public outreach in the trail planning process, developing a maintenance and management plan for the trail, and work related to developing trailhead facilities, a staging area, and an access road on the Jacobs Ranch property.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code (PRC) Sections 31160-31164, to address recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.

PRC Section 31162 authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area in order to achieve specified goals. Awarding a grant to the District for this project, which is located entirely within the designated nine county San Francisco Bay Area, is consistent with goal 31162(a), since it improves public access around the

ridgetops, by contributing towards the completion of regional Ridge Trail systems. The trail will be designed to not have a significant impact on agricultural operations, environmentally sensitive areas, or wildlife, which will be confirmed through subsequent CEQA review. As described below in the “Consistency with Adopted Regional and Local Plans” section, the project meets the requirement of Section 31162(a) that it be consistent with locally and regionally adopted plans.

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in PRC Section 31163(c), for the following reasons:

- (1) The project is supported by adopted local and regional plans (see “Consistency with Local and Regional Plans” section).
- (2) The project is multi-jurisdictional and serves a regional constituency by contributing toward the completion of the Ridge Trail system throughout the nine counties of the Bay Area.
- (3) The project can be implemented in a timely manner.
- (4) The project provides benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, since field evaluations have recently been completed for initial trail alignment assessments and there is momentum that has been built from the work supported by the previous Conservancy grants.
- (5) This project is supported by a nearly equal match from the District’s funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 11 Objective A**, the proposed project will implement a project that will increase the amount of land that is accessible to the public by performing the planning necessary to construct new public recreational trails.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** Conservancy funds are expected to be provided from an appropriation of the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) fund. Subsection 5096.650(b), established through this act, designated funds for “the conservancies in accordance with the particular provisions of the statute creating each conservancy”. In other words, the funds appropriated to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program may be used in accordance with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which created the program. The project is consistent with the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area

Conservancy Program, as described in the Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation section, above.

3. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by Member of Congress Lynn Woolsey, Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assemblyman Joe Nation, the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, Sonoma County Regional Parks, the Sonoma Land Trust, and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council.
4. **Location:** The project is located in Sonoma County, entirely within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy participation, this project will not occur in a timely manner.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** In creating the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, the legislature identified San Francisco Bay as the central feature in an interconnected open-space system of watersheds, natural habitats, scenic areas, agricultural lands and regional trails of statewide importance. In PRC Section 31162(a), the legislature identified improving public access to ridgetops as one of the goals of the Program. The North Slope Sonoma Mountain Trail Planning project will contribute towards the completion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, which creates regional connections between parklands, agricultural lands, open space and cultural resources.

Additional Criteria

7. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
8. **Readiness:** The District has already started initial trail planning activities and is prepared to commence additional work on this project immediately after obtaining Conservancy's approval and support.
9. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** This project will advance the Conservancy's goal of improving public access and recreation in and around the ridge tops in the San Francisco Bay Area, including by contributing towards the completion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. The project will also enable public access to the Skiles property, which the Conservancy helped to purchase for the purpose of protecting the Ridge Trail corridor.
10. **Cooperation:** The District intends to involve a variety of non-profit organizations, recreational groups and government agencies in the planning process for the trail and has already developed a volunteer stewardship program for maintaining some of the project area.

CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED LOCAL AND REGIONAL PLANS:

The project is consistent with the Sonoma County General Plan, which was adopted in 1989 and identified the project area as being for future park uses. Most of the properties within the project area are designated in the County General Plan as Scenic Landscape Units and border the Sonoma Mountain Scenic Corridor. The low-intensity public outdoor recreational use represented by trail construction is consistent with preservation of open space values within the scenic viewshed of Sonoma Mountain. The trail planning project is also consistent with the District's adopted Acquisition Plan 2000, which designates as recreational projects the properties in the project area that were acquired by the District.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project is statutorily exempt pursuant to California Code of Regulations Section 15262 (“Feasibility and Planning Studies”), since it is for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted, or funded. The planning studies will include consideration of environmental and cultural factors, to avoid impacts to sensitive environmental and archeological resources.

Part of the project consists of basic data collection and resource evaluation activities, including those necessary for planning the trail alignment and preparing environmental review documents for construction of the trail. These information-collecting activities will be designed and implemented in a manner that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource and are thus categorically exempt from CEQA review, under CCR Section 15306 (“Information Collection”).

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.